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Action, Experience, and Responsibility: Using *I* and *We* in High School Writing

Corinne McCumber
University of Minnesota, Morris
14 April 2018

Why don't we use first-person pronouns?

— — —

There are locutions left over from an intellectual stance of disinterested objectivity: the ideal of conclusions issuing 'perforce' from reasons and arguments rather than from the play of interested positions.¹

¹ Peter Elbow. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English* 53, no. 2 (1991): 144-5, accessed 18 March 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/378193.

Important uses of first-person pronouns

— — —

1. Introducing personal examples
2. Emphasizing community in a call to action
3. Reasserting an author's responsibility for a work

Introducing personal examples

— — —

[The use of the authorial / provides] the biographical incarnation of a theoretical point that seems, well, merely theoretical when expressed only in the abstract. The authorial / is not just a stylistic option in this piece; it is its ground.²

² James C. Raymond. "I-Dropping and Androgyny: The Authorial / in Scholarly Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 44, no. 4 (1993): 481, accessed 18 March 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/358383.

Call to action

— — —

Our first obligation, then, as rhetorical scholars is to look backwards at all the unquestioned scholarship that has come before; then, we must begin to re-map our notion of rhetorical history.³

³ Cheryl Glenn. "Sex, Lies, and Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric." *College Composition and Communication* 45, no. 2 (1994): 195, accessed 18 March 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/359005.

Regaining authorial responsibility

— — —

... what this study does suggest is this: While helping students use clear topic sentences in their writing and identify variously presented topical ideas in their reading, the teacher should not pretend that professional writers largely follow the practices he is advocating.⁴

⁴ Richard Braddock. "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose." *Research in the Teaching of English* 8, no. 3 (1974) : 301, accessed 18 March 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/40170600.

Regaining authorial responsibility

— — —

On a few occasions where I took an idea from a paragraph but it did not seem possible to cast it in the author's original words at all, I put the paragraph number in parentheses to indicate that. But I tried to use the author's words as much as I could, even, in some cases, where it yielded a somewhat unwieldy entry in the outline.⁵

⁵ Richard Braddock. "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose." *Research in the Teaching of English* 8, no. 3 (1974) : 293, accessed 18 March 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/40170600.

Classroom Applications

Call to action

— — —

- Examine news piece calling for some sort of policy or cultural change

If Democrats want to engage rural America culturally and politically, they need to understand us, and at least some of our ideals.⁶

⁶ Robert Leonard, “Why Gun Culture Is So Strong in Rural America,” *New York Times*, 16 March 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2DyhzPC>.

Personal examples

— — —

- Write a biographical paper
 - Link personal experiences to broader themes
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- Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*
 - John Krakauer's *Into the Wild*
 - Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Regaining responsibility

— — —

- Examine opinion pieces and scholarly works

... in 16 months, I haven't found a soul here who has ever experienced any pressure, or even endured a suggestion, to conform to the opinions expressed on the editorial page.⁷

The Times needs to be careful to label opinion and its many variants. The simple addition of a slug of type reading "commentary" ... would be a productive step, when appropriate; so would the introduction of consistent design signals across the various sections.⁷

⁷ Daniel Okrent. "A Few Points Along the Line between News and Opinion." *New York Times*, 27 Mar 2005, <https://nyti.ms/2GGctE2>.

Concluding remarks

Thank you